

## Stories of Courage: Vulnerability Sunday, 5/14/17

**1** J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in *The Return of the King*, “Courage is found in unlikely places.” Consider the following story from [storiesforpreaching.com](http://storiesforpreaching.com):

*On February 23, 1977, a priest named Oscar Romero was installed as Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador. His appointment dismayed a number of his fellow priests and delighted the repressive governing regime. Romero was known as a conservative and both the government and reform minded priests thought he would remain silent on the human rights abuses that were occurring throughout the country.*

*Romero soon proved them wrong. During his priesthood he had spent time with the campesinos (peasant farmers) that made up his congregations and his attitude to politics changed. He saw the ways power and wealth were manipulated to the advantage of a small group of families. For the poor majority this issued in hunger, children dying because their parents could not afford medicines, and extreme violence, including beatings, rape and murder, when they dared object.*

*Two weeks after his installation, Archbishop Romero’s friend, Rutilio Grande, was murdered by the paramilitary. Grande had been creating self-reliance groups among the campesinos and was seen to challenge the status quo. Romero demanded the Government investigate the murder, but his demand was met with silence.*

*From this point on Romero’s opposition to State sanctioned injustice became increasingly vocal. He used his masses, his public speeches, his Sunday sermons that were broadcast by radio, and both public and private correspondence, to denounce the exploitation of the poor and the violence against those who opposed injustice. He publicly reported injustices and called for reform of the political and economic institutions which entrenched violence and injustice...Romero became an outspoken advocate for justice. [but] Romero had got[ten] in the way. On the 24<sup>th</sup> [of] May, 1980, as he was celebrating mass, Romero was assassinated by gunshot. Just moments before he had said: ‘We know that every effort to improve society, above all when society is so full of injustice and sin, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us.’*

**2** What is it that leads some people to “get in the way,” to put everything on the line, even their very lives. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.” How rare is it then for a person like Oscar Romero to die for people living on the bottom rung of society?

We continue our series on Courage this morning with Courageous Vulnerability. Vulnerability might look like many things. When we share a personal story or our feelings with another person, that’s a form of vulnerability. When we try something new, knowing that there’s a chance that we’ll fail, that also is vulnerability. When we risk our physical or emotional wellbeing for the sake of another, that’s yet another form of vulnerability. Some vulnerability is simply circumstantial, like discovering that you’ve boarded a doomed cruise ship like the titanic. But today we’re going to explore a different kind of vulnerability: courageous vulnerability. Courageous vulnerability is displayed when we intentionally open our lives to the possibility of criticism or hurt for the sake of doing what Jesus would do. In our next Bible account, we hear of the courageous vulnerability of Esther. I’m reading from the Old Testament book of Esther, chapter 7, beginning with the first verse.

**{Read Esther 7:1-7, NLT}.**

**3** Esther is one of those books that you really have to read if you enjoy a good dramatic movie. It’s got all the elements of a captivating story: Esther, the heroine raised out of obscurity into a place of power; Haman, the sinister court villain plotting the demise of Esther and her people; and a great dramatic reversal of fortune that sees the villain’s plot foiled and the villain given over to justice. Not only is it a satisfying story, like all Scripture, it has things to teach us about what it means for us to be God’s people. In particular, Esther teaches us about what it means to display courageous vulnerability for the sake of others.

A brief synopsis of the whole story, courtesy of [shmoop.com](http://shmoop.com), goes like this:

*The Book of Esther begins with the Queen of King [Xerxes]—Vashti—snubbing the king's request to meet with her...[Xerxes]...divorces her. Now he needs to pick a new queen and [selects] Esther—a comely, young (secretly Jewish) woman who is a part of his harem...Esther's an orphan who was raised by her righteous cousin, Mordecai. When the king came looking for young virgins to possibly fill the role of his new queen, Esther made*

*sure to jump into line. She wins favor with the people in the harem and eventually with the king himself, becoming queen. Moreover, Mordecai helps uncover a plot to kill the king, allowing Esther to warn him in time. This earns him some Brownie points as well.*

*But all is not well in the king's courts—treachery is afoot. When Mordecai refuses to bow down to the evil counselor Haman in the street, the evil... counselor decides to engineer a plot to murder all the Jews in the Persian Empire. The plot basically involves Haman going to the king and saying, "I think we should kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire." And the king says (to paraphrase him), "Alright."*

*Haman walks away,... glad that the king has cottoned to his genocidal plans. The king doesn't know that his own queen is Jewish, because Esther's been keeping it secret. But the threat of the Jews' imminent demise kicks Esther and Mordecai into action. Mordecai goes and wails outside the palace gates while wearing sackcloth, and Esther fasts for three days before visiting the king.*

*Esther is worried the king will execute her for visiting him unannounced, but—to the contrary—he is mellow and pleased. He offers to give her whatever she wants. She asks him to have a banquet for her and Haman the next day. Then, after that banquet, she asks for another one on the following day. Meanwhile, Haman is excited about the massacre that's about to happen. He builds a huge gallows to hang Mordecai.*

*But his hopes are dashed the following morning, when the king—remembering how Mordecai saved his life—orders Haman to honor Mordecai and lead him in a parade through the town (which Haman very reluctantly does). At the second banquet, Esther asks the king to punish Haman for trying to kill her and her people—and the king does. Haman is hanged to death on the same gallows he had built for Mordecai.*

**4** Esther, the heroine and namesake of the book, has some things in common with the bleeding woman from our earlier reading of the Gospel of Mark. Both were women who showed courageous vulnerability in approaching men of great power. The bleeding woman showed courageous vulnerability by touching Jesus, something that was expressly forbidden under the Jewish purity code given her constant bleeding. She was perpetually unclean, no better than a leper. She conceivably took her life in her hands by crossing the boundary of touching Jesus. Similarly, Esther showed courageous vulnerability in her initial approach to

King Xerxes. Nobody was allowed to approach the throne of the King without first being summoned. The penalty for doing so was death, unless the King decided to show clemency. So Esther also took her life in her hands by deciding to approach King Xerxes. Both woman found their courage through faith that in doing so they could find just resolution to their dire circumstances: The bleeding woman seeking healing and a consequent restoration of her social status by becoming “clean” again; Esther seeking deliverance from extermination for herself and the remainder of the Jewish exiles in Persia.

**5** What does it mean for us today to show courageous vulnerability? Often it means opening ourselves to the possibility of failure by trying new things. Nobody likes to fail. It’s embarrassing, it’s frustrating, and it eats away at our self-esteem. And yet, trying new things is the most essential way that we learn and grow.

History is replete with famous people who had the courage to endure failure and went on to succeed. [Ideachampions.com](http://Ideachampions.com) lists these famous failures:

*Albert Einstein: He wasn’t able to speak until he was almost four years old and his teachers said he would ‘never amount to much.’ Walt Disney: Fired from a newspaper for ‘lacking imagination’ and ‘having no original ideas.’ Oprah Winfrey: Was demoted from her job as a news anchor because she ‘wasn’t fit for television.’ Michael Jordan: After being cut from his high school basketball team, he went home, locked himself in his room, and cried. Steve Jobs: At 30 years-old he was left devastated and depressed after being unceremoniously removed from the company he started. The Beatles. Rejected by Decca Recording Studios, who said ‘We don’t like their sound- they have no future in show business.*

**6** As Christians, courageous vulnerability that risks failure, rejection, and pain, both physical and emotional, draws on a firm conviction that our identity is rooted in Christ and our status as children of God. It’s that conviction alone that allows us to risk exposing the many inner layers of our lives to the scrutiny of others in community. Bene Brown, author of *Daring Greatly*, wrote that “Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.”

Every Advent season we reflect on the incredible vulnerability of our God who chose to be incarnated as a child, to walk through the years and the vicissitudes of life as we do, and then, in the ultimate act of vulnerability, allowed himself to be beaten, broken, and crucified- not out of weakness, but out of a limitless, vulnerable love for his creation, for you and for me. Most of us won't be called to courageously give our lives in a single act of heroic martyrdom. Perhaps courageous vulnerability in the small, everyday things of life is how we truly can pick up our crosses and follow Jesus. Courageous vulnerability in sharing your pain with someone else, or in listening to the pain of another. Courageous vulnerability in going out on a limb to try something new, doing so not for your own sake, but for the sake of another.

**7** Bonnie Gray, writing in Christianity Today, spoke to our need for courageous vulnerability when she wrote,

*We are all in the middle of something. We weren't made to suffer through this unfinished journey alone. We were made to be in community. In the same way God spoke the first light into the darkness with his voice, God gave each of us a voice that was created to be heard. To be known. To be understood. God has made a way to meet this need—through you and me. Jesus gave us each other. We don't have to journey alone. He gives us the ability to carry each other's burdens.*

And that's the other key to courageous vulnerability, isn't it? As children of God, made in the image of Christ and bearing the light of Christ, we were made to be in community. And there can be no authentic community without courageous vulnerability, with the will to dare showing each other who we really are, risking our very selves, so that we can more fully grow into who God is leading us to become, individually, and as a church. Please pray with me.

*Creator God, sometimes with all our scars and pain, it's difficult to remember that we were created in your image, destined to be restored to perfection through the love of Jesus. Remind us of that in clear and powerful ways this week, giving us the courage to be vulnerable, for the sake of a lost and hurting world. Amen.*



# *Buffalo United Methodist Church*



*...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!*

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